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ABSTRACT

Most cultures in the world have an educational tradition dating from well before the Christian era. These ancient educational systems were quite different from the modern Euro-American system that is now so prevalent everywhere, and were successful in producing graduates who were experts as well as citizens of character. This paper suggests that many countries could, and probably should, draw on their own educational tradition to improve or enhance modern education. To illustrate, the paper describes one traditional system: that of North American Indians. North American Indian children up to the age of 10-12 spent their time playing and helping their extended families in the tasks of daily life, assimilating numerous skills and a strong work ethic. Their grandparents usually supervised them and supplied stories and examples directed toward teaching courtesy and building character. Formal education was geared toward a calling, decided by the community based on the child's needs, talents, and personality. The child then studied for many years with one major teacher. Instruction was individually tailored so that children could not fail. Assessment was ongoing and conducted by the entire community. To be a teacher, one needed to master one's profession and apply one's learning toward the achievement of wisdom and spiritual truth. Character was emphasized throughout the process. Other viable systems of education existed throughout the world, and despite cultural differences, there were similarities among them. Aspects of ancient educational systems that could be used in reforming the modern Euro-American system of education include local community ownership of the school, integrated curriculum, strong emphasis on character, changes in the student-teacher relationship, and the value of lifelong learning. Examples are given of modern adoption of traditional educational principles and practices. (Contains 12 references.) (TD)

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The potential contribution of comparative and international education to educational reform: an examination of traditional, non-Western education.

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Most countries and cultural groups in the world have an educational tradition dating from well before the pre-Christian era. These ancient educational systems had a profile quite different from the modern Euro-American system that is now so prevalent everywhere, and, contrary to any unexamined belief that ancient and traditional means inferior, were apparently successful in producing graduates who were experts as well as citizens of character. This paper suggests that many countries could, and probably should, draw on their own educational tradition to improve or enhance modern education.

To illustrate, I would like to briefly describe one traditional system: that of North American Indians. Naturally, with over 500 tribes, there was no monolithic system of education in indigenous America, but American Indians shared many important values and assumptions, so education across the tribes was surprisingly similar (Coggins, Williams, & Radin, 1997). Up to age 10-12, young children spent most of their time in play (Deloria, 1994). Much of this play was directed by the children's grandparents, and included stories and examples directed toward teaching courtesy and building character. The children also spent considerable time helping their extended families in the tasks of daily life, assimilating numerous skills and a strong work ethic (Miller, 1988; Nicholas, 1991). All of this informal education used a conversational form of instruction. Modern American Indians, asked to remember their elementary education, remember almost nothing from formal Anglo-style schooling, but have near verbatim recall of this conversational instruction (Deloria, 1994).

Traditional formal education was geared toward specialization in a calling, or profession. Both the child's parents (and no doubt other relatives) and prospective teachers deliberated on the child's needs, talents, and personality, as well as on the needs of the family and the community, and reached a consensual decision on what field the child should train for, and which teacher he or she should study with. Depending on the profession, the child then studied for many years, generally in a very small group, with one major teacher. Although every adult member of the community took responsibility for a child's education (Friesen, 1993), the relationship with the central teacher was one-on-one and lasted for life. This education was provided free of charge, out of love for children and for the greater good of the community.

During both the informal and formal stages of education, children could not fail: instruction was developmentally appropriate, individually tailored, and as much time as was needed was spent on mastery. As a result,

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children developed a strong sense of confidence and competence (Antone, 1992; Deloria, 1994; Nicholas, 1991).

Standards of mastery for teachers and for their graduates were very high, and were also consensually arrived at by the entire community. This assessment was ongoing, but also took place at communal ceremonies and festivities, where the outcomes of education would be evaluated based on performance. There were two criteria of excellence which had to be met. First, to be considered for teaching, an individual needed to be a master at his or her profession, as demonstrated through effectiveness over time. Less than expert teachers were not tolerated, by the simple expedient of not sending them any students. Second, teachers needed to be people who had taken their extensive experience, reflected on it, and incorporated this learning, along with their own spiritual insights and the knowledge of tribal elders, for a twofold purpose: to achieve wisdom, and to pursue a lifelong personal quest for spiritual truth (Friesen, 1993). Both students and their teachers were expected to have good character, and character was emphasized throughout the educational process.

In Native America, there was not merely parent and community participation in the school: the parents and the community owned the school in every sense. Indeed, the community was the school. As a result of this structure, as well as American Indian philosophy, both the early informal education and the later, more formal education, were consistently taught in the context of the community's religious and philosophical beliefs, and were therefore fully integrated. Separation of subjects into discrete and unrelated domains was not a possibility.

By comparison, what of the modern Western system of education? Of course, there are individual teachers and schools who are successful, but according to critics and educational reformers, as a whole our system is producing students who have neither excellent character nor extensive content expertise. They are trained to make a living, but they do not finish schooling with a broad range of skills, nor are they trained to be lifelong learners. Our students do not, as a rule, relate their education to a personal quest for spiritual knowledge. In fact, because we chop up the curriculum into unrelated parts, and use standardized assessment that is not tied directly to the curriculum, our students do not usually even relate the component parts of their education into an integrated whole. Our students do not appear prepared to be good citizens, nor do they respect personal or social elders. They do not even demonstrate courtesy (Ignas, 1979).

The traditional system of North American Indians was not the only viable model of education. Large and well-

documented systems existed, among other locations, in ancient India, China, Persia, North Africa, and South America. A tribal system similar to that in North America existed in Sub-Saharan Africa. There were also many smaller local systems which appear to have been just as effective, such as the systems in the South Pacific (e.g., Hawaii, see Piper, 1994; Pulap Atoll, see Flinn, 1992;). Religious groups also had effective educational systems, such as the Jews, the Sufis, and the Druids. Although naturally there were unique aspects, an examination of these ancient systems reveals a surprising degree of similarity among all of them.

If we were to look to these ancient systems to inform, and even reform, any modern system, we would need to consider cultural consistency, since education is, of course, embedded in culture, and cultural values set the parameters. Reviving the old educational ways of one's own culture is perhaps easier to visualize. Remnants of the original system may survive to the present. Furthermore, if the culture still exists, there would be more spontaneous understanding of, or open-mindedness toward, the educational philosophy undergirding the changes than if such changes were adopted in a different culture. In some cases, the modern culture might even be quite consistent with the ancient culture in which these educational systems were embedded.

Importing ideas across cultures would be more problematical, both in terms of success and desirability. Small class sizes, a lifelong relationship with one's teacher, full community control of educational standards: these would be a hard sell in Anglo culture. Yet, up to the recent present, the Euro-American system of education was not so different from these ancient systems. Furthermore, alternative models and philosophies of education in the West during the past few hundred years, including those of the past few decades, have shared many of the characteristics of ancient systems. So, I would argue that these ancient and traditional systems may be less alien than they appear at first glance.

Besides culture, what stands in the way of adopting any of the characteristics of ancient educational systems?

- First, natural resistance to change by individuals and societies, and the investment in the existing system by educational leaders who were themselves successful in the system.
- Second, laws and bureaucracies which reinforce the current model.
- Third, a pervasive cultural imperialism that directs us to believe that the Euro-American system is superior to traditional systems.

- And fourth, a conviction that the technical complexities of the modern world dictate the system we now have.

Despite these and many other obstacles, this procedure of adapting ancient education to the modern world has been implemented on occasion. One example is the Navajo Rough Rock School in Chinle, Arizona (USA). Although students board at the school because of the huge distances involved, community people run the dormitories, serving the traditional educational functions of parents and grandparents. Tribal healers are involved in counseling the students. Evenings are spent telling traditional stories. Classes are small, and the curriculum includes standard modern subjects as well as traditional American Indian subjects, all taught in the context of American Indian beliefs (ACTS, 1996; Yazzie, 1978).

Another notable example is the Institute of Higher Learning. Located in South India, this entire K-Ph.D. system is a modern adaptation of ancient Indian educational principles and practices. The modern value of equity is practiced by open admissions based on merit. The students again board at the schools (which is consistent with ancient Indian practice), but rather than a single teacher for life the system has students changing teachers from year to year. The teachers do live with the students, however, spending leisure time helping with studies and personal issues. The students and teachers spend their Saturdays together doing service work in rural villages. The curriculum is standard for the modern world, but every subject is taught in the context of the Indian spiritual philosophy that transcends religion in India. Equal emphasis is placed on character and on academics, and both are acknowledged and rewarded. Assessment is conducted through personal teacher evaluations, national achievement exams, and public performance. Consistent with most ancient systems, all of this education is provided free of charge.

These schools report results ranging from retaining students who would otherwise drop out of the system, students who graduate and go on to live productive lives in the case of the American Indian-controlled schools; to graduates who sweep the top academic honors in the national exam every year, and go on to live lives of service, characterized by good character in the case of the Indian system.

So, this idea of adapting ancient systems of education is possible. Would there be value in importing some of these ideas into our modern system? I am arguing that we have little to lose and everything to gain, especially if we move slowly and thoughtfully. Those of us who teach and study comparative and international education have two

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obvious contributions to make here. We could describe these ancient systems in our writing and teaching, and we could work with educators in our own countries in a joint effort at improving modern education.

If we were to use such ancient systems of education to inform or even reform the modern system, what might be changed? Setting aside feasibility for the moment, here is a menu of possibilities:

1) Local community ownership of the school. This would mean the community would collectively determine teaching credentials and expertise, and the criteria for graduation. Teachers would be accountable to the community for the educational outcomes, especially the learning and the character, of their students. The entire community would support this endeavor by consistently reinforcing the teachers' social, emotional, moral, and intellectual lessons.

2) An integrated curriculum, taught in a meaningful philosophical, religious and/or spiritual context, consistent with the local community. In addition to extensive curricular reform, this would demand a sense of community far beyond what is available in many cities, but not beyond the reach of smaller towns elsewhere.

3) A strong emphasis on character throughout the educational process, including an emphasis on service to the community and/or society.

4) Changes in the student-teacher relationship, such as small class sizes; mutual selection of students by parents and teachers; staying with one teacher for an extended period of time; a more extensive relationship with the teacher; individualized instruction.

5) Instilling the value of lifelong learning, and of working towards the goals of personal wisdom and spiritual insight.

The argument being made here is not to implement all of these changes, or to do so immediately, but rather that such changes, especially changes that are culturally consistent, are worth considering for their potential to improve modern education.

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NOTE: This paper is based on the author's book, Ancient lessons: Applications of traditional, non-Western educational systems to the present day, forthcoming, New York: Falmer Press.

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